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An Analysis of Chicana Feminist Rhetoric as exemplified by Cherrie Moraga

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***An Analysis of Chicana Feminist Rhetoric as
exemplified by Cherrie Moraga***

A Thesis

The Honors Program

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Distinction "All College Honors"

and the degree Bachelor of Arts

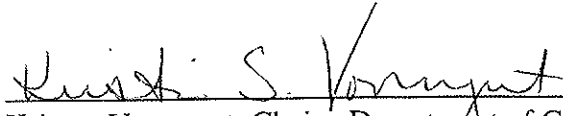
In the Department of Liberal Studies

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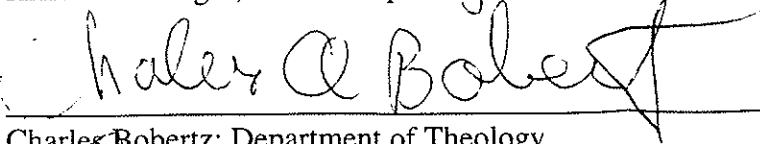
Heather Rogers

May, 1997

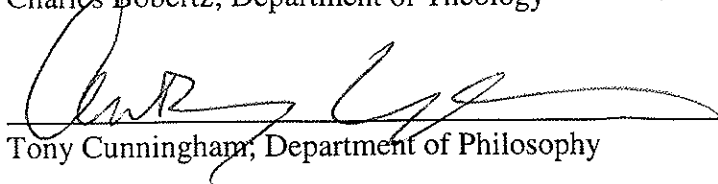
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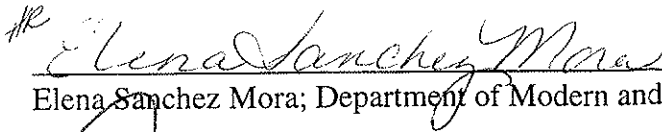
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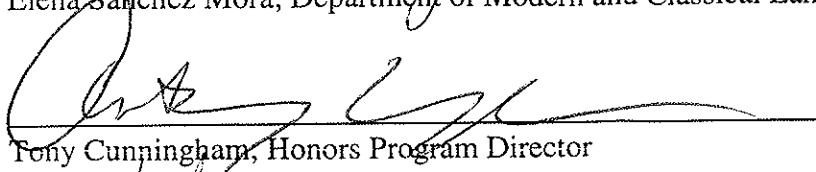
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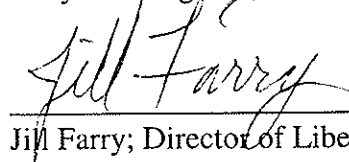
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Author Johnella Butnir commented that when studying scholarship about marginalized groups, “Intellectual honesty is seen to exist only where political realities are ignored or reduced; cultural differences are transcended rather than acknowledged and utilized where studies of the West seem curiously separate from the study of the traditions and experiences that make up the U.S.” (Butnir 2). The implicit message is that for some minority groups, integration and assimilation into dominant culture mean the negation of their cultural identity and values; the melting or blending of self into the dominant ideal. Feminist, lesbian, and Chicana scholars can challenge these basic assumptions about the society that dominant U.S. culture has created as they interpret the differences of their own experience that do not lie within the dominant culture’s reality. I am interested in understanding how rhetors deal with the confluence of “oppressions”. Cherrie Moraga, a Chicana lesbian, clearly addresses this problematic situation in her work, particularly her essay, *La Guera*, and her poem, *Winter of Oppression*, 1982. Moraga takes the difficulty that multiple identities present and turns that into an ideal perspective for discussing the problems Chicana women face within the feminist movement.

Understanding the rhetoric of Chicana feminists, and the issues of multiple identities, is important because it reveals the unique problems that Chicanas face in the United States context. These women can neither completely affiliate nor identify with Chicanos, Anglos, or contemporary feminists. “Space, as it relates to home, is a notable theme in the writings of Chicana feminists. Living with the unique experience of being part of a border culture between Mexico and the Southwestern part of the United States, Chicanas/os find themselves with a foot in both worlds” (Flores 151). The numerous “borders” on which Chicana feminists find

themselves lacks sufficient discursive space and encounter boundaries that constrain their actions and identity.

Cherrie Moraga, a Chicana lesbian feminist advocate, spans many of these borders. Moraga cannot entirely identify with the Chicano movement, American women's movement or the Gay/lesbian movements. Even within the Chicana movement, Moraga experienced subjugation because of her sexual orientation. According to Laura Doan, "Moraga is often trivialized because this is just a lesbian perspective and therefore a marginal one." (Doan 113). Socio-political movements that were created to help support Moraga forced her to negotiate her multiple identities and succeeded in highlighting the degree of oppression that she faced. The majority of her work has focused on reassessing the role of Chicana, lesbian, and feminist ideology by concentrating on her multiple identities. Moraga has exposed these layers of oppression by using them as the subject of her rhetoric.

Although critics generally have positively reviewed the work of Cherrie Moraga, scholars have not sufficiently studied her work. This is a reflection of the current state of research in the United States. Literary critics, such as writers for the *Library Journal* expressed that "... (Moraga) is a Chicana lesbian determinedly resisting assimilation. It is much to Moraga's credit that her confessional manifestos largely succeed. Vulnerable and wise, her works set us yearning with the author 'to be fully known and loved'. The liberal mixing of English, Spanish and Spanglish rings just right; cognates, context and momentum fold the languages into an intelligible and evocative whole (Flood 184). *Ms Magazine* noted in response to *La Guera* that "... (Moraga) demands total engagement and raises the most painful of feminine questions. What are the forces that divide women from one another? How have white women betrayed their

sisters of color? How have women of color betrayed each other?" (Manderbaum 39). Jan Clausen, a writer for the *Nation Magazine*, remarks that "... (Moraga) has emerged as an eloquent voice in the U.S. feminist movement. Her work is a feminist classic whose relevance has only increased in the dozen years since its initial publication ... She emphasizes a coalition between politics and awareness (Clausen 164). Communication scholars, such as Johnella Butner, noted that This Bridge called my Back (which Moraga co-edited) is a, "... pioneering work. This work and others began and continue the dialogue upon which can be based full incorporation of white women and men and women of color into the liberal arts curriculum" (Watler xix). Despite positive reviews of her work, insufficient attention has focused on the progress that Moraga has made within the Chicana, feminist and lesbian movements.

It is important to study women like Moraga because Chicana, feminist and lesbian movements may initially appear to maintain sufficient "common ground" to support multiple identities. However, they are three different and distinct movements; none of which can completely meet the needs of groups that struggle with multiple identities. This is an indication of the complexity of the American social context. The relationships between these movements can be problematic; studying two or three fields simultaneously suggests an inaccurate or an incomplete study of these categories in their entirety. For example, scholars who explore questions about race, often see gender as a wrinkle in the group fabric, as if people do not always come in two sexes. Feminist scholars often see the addition of race or class as somehow diluting rather than strengthening a feminist approach, as if men and women do not belong to a particular ethnic group or to a particular economic and social class. Each sees the other subject as 'deviant' or 'irrelevant' in his or her study (Abel, Pearson - 20). Such "visions" negatively affect the

analysis of marginalized groups, such as Chicanas, because they limit possible perspective. For example, studying Moraga from an exclusively Chicana, exclusively lesbian, exclusively feminist, or an exclusively literary perspective could result in four very different papers. Therefore, the understanding of Moraga and other feminist scholars of color in America needs to be broadened to include comprehension of the simultaneity of oppression and multiple identities.

The challenges that Chicanas face is manifested in their rhetoric. By nature, Chicana feminist rhetoric is neither “Western nor nonWestern” (Flores 145). It is poignantly observable that most Chicana feminist rhetors utilize first person, employ multiple languages, reflect diversity and emphasize identity. A significant portion of Chicana rhetoric intends to increase the exposure of Chicanas and to deconstruct the preexisting rhetoric by including a focus on everyday experiences and their culture. “Understanding Chicanas requires insight into the lives and experiences of the women, and this celebration of the everyday leads to an empowerment of the Chicanas “(Flores 147).

A significant portion of Chicana rhetoric is found in the form of poetry, or other “private” discourses. “Poetry is the single most important genre employed by Chicanas [and other women’s liberation movements in Latin America] in order to group and give shape to their experience” (Alarcon 12). Chicana poets, focusing on rebuilding self worth and community pride, were on the forefront of the construction of a Chicana feminist discourse (Zavella 29). Through actively writing poetry, there was an extraordinary measure of empowerment for those women who were supposed to stay at home, be good wives and mothers, and be care givers: active within the domestic sphere but not the public one. (Rebolledo 30).

Although Chicana women share their political, social and cultural history with Chicanos,

their “discourse reflects a specific nature of their experiences of multiple oppressions” (Flores 143). Discursive space has been created through Chicana rhetoric that acknowledges their differences, and has allowed a “marginalized group to reverse existing and external definitions and to create their own definitions and identity. . . . This means that the margins are transformed into the center of a new society, and the disempowered find power” (Flores 152). By creating a space where Chicanas can be both Chicana and feminist, they are able to accept the contradiction of having multiple identities. Even the label “Chicana feminist” is evidence of multiple identities because the term reflects an identity which is neither Chicano nor feminist, but synthesized from both.

Feminist rhetoric has become institutionally recognized within the last thirty years. Critics contend that contemporary feminist criticism is more educated, more sophisticated and polished, and more at home in the world of academia than ever before (Zimmerman 116). In turn, however, codifying feminist rhetoric has also become more complex. For example, feminist scholar Christine Mason Sutherland, once noted that, “Feminist rhetoric is huge. There are several sliding definitions, which are too wide to be useful” (Sutherland 328).

Despite no distinct form, with the exception of a pattern of reluctance to use violent or coercive language, many rhetorical critics argue that feminist rhetoric in the United States does utilize the unique method of “consciousness raising”. Consciousness raising was first utilized to provide support for and among women. Rhetors can use consciousness raising to establish an environment of shared community in and among the audience (Lunsford 319). This is a valuable tool for feminist rhetors because of its ability to raise awareness in an audience and create a collective group experience. Many critics and rhetors maintain that consciousness

raising is effective because “personal is political” in feminist rhetoric.

Feminist rhetors are committed to educating one another that there has been an adoption of the dominant cultures’s structure, beliefs, and values, which has created a reality amongst non-dominant cultures. Coupled with the feminist movement, feminist rhetors are making an effort to resist colonization (Butner 18).

Internal corrosion, a loss of esteem, a loss of confidence in one’s knowledge, and in the inability to give expression to experience is catalyzed by the colonization of the dominant culture. In the heart of the colonization of women is the belief of the superiority of men, infallibility of male judgement and authority and in absolute priority given to achieving male approval and validation. The women’s movement is unlearning this process of colonization (Able, Pearson, 2).

The women’s movement focuses on the ability to value women and women’s rhetorical works on its own merit. This is a philosophical shift; it implies placing women at the center of cultural thinking and resisting the trope.

Similarly, lesbian feminist rhetoric has no fixed form. Over the past decade scholarship on lesbian and gay issues has rapidly increased, not only in scope and size but also in the level of acceptance as “valid” research within the academy. Although lesbian-feminist theory has long been a part of the academic field of women's studies, only recently has it begun to gain a degree of critical autonomy (Goodloe 4).

The common “lesbian experience” contributes to the formation of a “lesbian identity” and in turn to lesbian culture, community, and literature and criticism (Zimmerman 119). Lesbian feminists are committed to the belief in the primacy of the gender over other forms of oppression,

to the extent that they have begun to theorize lesbianism as a provisional identity "situated in a web of multiple oppressions and identities", taking into account differences of race, class and ethnicity. This newer version of feminist lesbians, which has shifted away from an exclusive focus on gender towards an understanding of multiple oppressions, is a more a "decentered" movement which "may present new democratic potential".

Understanding Cherrie Moraga's rhetoric on a deeper level requires insight into the social, political and cultural history that surrounds her. The Chicano movement appeared with the second wave of feminism in the 1960's. The movement began when members of the Mexican American movement decided to call themselves Chicanos. By naming themselves they took on an awareness of their place in society. Chicanos began to take pride in their mestizo heritage and pride in both their European and Indian history. It became important during those years to preserve the Spanish language and many of the traditions that were being lost as the force of assimilation led more and more into the mainstream culture (Lopez 6). Spanish soon became the unifying element of the culture (Lopez 9).

It was soon apparent to the Chicanas that the movement benefitted men considerably more than it benefitted women. Social-sexual hierarchies existed, and most Chicanos believed the women's place was within the family. The nationalist ideology guiding the Chicano movement precluded attempts by Chicana activists to denounce sexism within the movement or to point out Chicana subordination within Chicano families. Being a woman in Chicano culture meant that one should not speak out. "As Latin American women, [they] are heirs of a culture of silence" (Gomez viii). Their loyalty was to their family and their heritage, not to themselves as individuals. "[Chicanas] oftentimes put their countries first, their identities as Latin people

first, and subvert what are considered 'personal' needs for 'political imperatives" (Doan 45).

History often assumed that Chicanas were the primary bearers of traditional cultural values that perpetuated machismo. "Chicanas are usually mentioned only in relation to their family roles, as if Chicanas were not workers, political activists, writers or thinkers" (Zavella 25).

One dimension of the Chicana experience, the passive Chicana sex role, is reinforced by the historical/mythical female figure of Malintzin Tenepal. Also known as Malinche, she was a translator, advisor and mistress to the Spanish conqueror of Mexico, Hernan Cortez. Malintzin is considered to be the mother of Mexican people. But unlike La Virgen de Guadalupe, she is not revered as the Virgin Mother, but rather slandered as La Chingada, meaning the "fucked one" or La Vendida, "sell out" to the white race. She is blamed for the "bastardization" of the indigenous people of Mexico. Chicano men accuse her of betraying her race, and over centuries have come to blame her entire sex for this transgression. This myth effects the racial/sexual identity relationship amongst Chicanas. "There is hardly a Chicana growing up today who does not suffer under her name" (Moraga 90).

Bernal Diaz del Castillo notes that upon the death of Malinche's father, the young Aztec princess was in line to inherit his estate. But, Malinche's mother wanted her son (the second born child) to inherit the wealth. So she sold her daughter into slavery. Malinche was betrayed by her own mother which reinforces the inherent unreliability of women; a natural predisposition for treachery which was carved into the bone of Mexico /Chicano collective psychology. Traitor begets traitor (Lopez 19). The relationship between the Malinche and the Eve image is obvious. Both Eve and Malinche were portrayed as the original sinners, and are responsible for paradise lost. Potential accusation of "traitor" or "Vendida" is what hangs above the heads and hearts of

most Chicanas (See Footnote).

The myth of Malinche continues to be a symbol amongst Chicanas because of the cultural pressure that it enforces. Chicanas “should” fight racism with their men, challenge sexism single-handedly, but retain their “femininity” so not to offend or threaten their men. In more recent years Chicana feminists reflect the commitment to put females first, even if that means criticizing the men.

Many of the Chicanas turned to the United States women’s movement for support. However, it was within this movement that Chicanas faced the race issue. Members of the women’s movement, white women in particular, claimed to be speaking for all women, yet they were not implicitly concerned with the simultaneity of experience - how race, class and gender are experienced by Chicanas concurrently. This is a crucial difference in the ideology and epistemology between Chicana studies and women’s studies, and within feminist theory as a whole.

Race, gender and class are socially constructed in the sense that these differences take on meaning within a specific social and historical context. Determining the degree of marginalization is the difference between developing and claiming an identity on the basis of race, class or gender and having one’s status determined by these factors. One of the unsettled issues is the implicit notion that racism and the social construction of race are somehow secondary to gender. Many Chicana scholars believe that feminists consider gender to be primary and view the experience of women of color as another issue. This ideology ignores the simultaneity of the experience of being a minority and a woman (Zavella 30). Understanding the complexity of the Chicano/a experience is unattainable if the category of gender is the only point

of analysis. Chicana theorists drew on theories that clarified race and ethnicity, and criticized the inattention to gender within race/ethnicity perspectives (Zavella 27).

Another significant contradictory ideology lies between Chicana and women's movements. Many Chicanas could not accept all of American feminist ideologies. In particular, the early feminist criticism of the nuclear family was problematic for Chicanas. In contrast to the women's movement, the Chicano movement placed a high value on family. Words like "la familia" and "carnalismo" founded the central values of the ideology of the Chicano movement which used the family to symbolize the need for unity, strength, and struggle with adversity. Thus, while white feminists were recognizing what they termed as the "tyranny" of the traditional family, Chicana activists were celebrating the unity of traditional Chicano families. When white feminists were demanding reproductive rights (including abortion), Chicano activists were fighting forced sterilization and defending their right to bear children. Chicanas were not ready to embrace feminism as it was articulated in the early 1970's (Zavella 27).

Some Chicanas still won't identify themselves as feminists. Instead they use the word, "womanist". Alice Walker's definition of a Chicana womanist is, "A Chicana feminist. A Chicana who loves other women, sexually and or nonsexually. One who appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility and strength. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, women and men. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health" (Zavella 32).

Chicana lesbians face a significant degree of hostility within the Chicana movement because they are the most visible manifestation of a woman assuming control of her life and identity by suppressing the role that a husband typically plays in the family. There is an

ideological conflict that feminist scholars face in an ethnic studies frame of reference regarding lesbianism. Ethnic studies either avoid issues concerning lesbianism or are downright hostile to them. The relatively new emergence of a lesbian community is as a self-defined set of individuals who claim an identity. They are no longer adequately described as a population merely participating in certain behaviors.

Historically, it was in the women's movement that lesbianism was first legally acknowledged. In 1971, the National Organization of Women officially recognized that lesbians were also oppressed women. Goodloe argues in one of her papers that despite recognition as oppressed people, lesbian feminists felt the need to fix lesbian identity as somewhat stable and coherent to gain political ground and to classify themselves as a "minority" deserving of protection against discrimination. The boundaries of this identity were fairly narrow, and excluded those whose experience of being lesbian didn't measure up to the feminist "ideal". The tension produced by this move was away from recognizing lesbianism as a personal and political choice and towards a more essential understanding of lesbian identity. Goodloe contends that, "feminism may have failed to adequately address the multiplicity of sexual difference in its analysis of the sex/gender system" (Goodloe 6).

One of the other issues that threatened to divide lesbians from feminists in the early stages of the women's movement was the practice of identity politics. Identity politics is concerned with the nature and boundaries of identity and has been central to most social movements of the past few decades. Identity politics assumes a coherent, unified, and stable identity on the basis of which individuals should not be discriminated against; while activists concerned with ending racism and classism have used identity politics with some success, gender

and especially sexuality pose a more difficult problem. Lesbian feminists do not see themselves as being part of a transhistorical minority of one in ten or one in twenty, but as the model of womanhood that is free (Barry 14). Rather than wanting acceptance as a minority which is defined in opposition to an accepted and inevitably heterosexual majority, some lesbian feminist theorists seek to dismantle the victimizing power of heterosexuality. One strategy is the promotion of lesbianism as one particular lifestyle that exists for women (Goodloe 12).

In the early 1970's lesbians drew away from the gay movement. They had become frustrated with the movement because they were tired from "reminding" the men in the movement of their existence (Barry 17). A unified, coherent "gay identity" is still struggling to exist because it fails to adequately account for the varieties of difference within the ranks of "gay". The result is a movement which claims to represent all gay people but does so only for white, middle class gay men (Barry 32).

Because Moraga assumes so many different identities, and focuses her rhetoric on the problems that women with multiple identities face, her audience consists primarily of those who can identify with her. This includes women of color, (particularly Chicanas), lesbians, and those associated with the feminist movement. Moraga acknowledges that she occasionally feels like she "is being asked by all sides to be a 'representative' of the race, the sex, the sexuality - or at all costs to avoid that" (Loving vi).

Writing in a language that her audience will be able to comprehend is one of Moraga's obstacles. Because Spanish is one of the unifying factors within the movement, Moraga must negotiate how to mix Spanish and English so that her readers can comprehend her messages. Her language choices are effective because of code-switching and genre-blending as she writes in

English with Spanish accentuation and cadences (Butner 56). The different styles of language represent different aspects of Chicana heritage, and the use of expression of different backgrounds give voice to previously silenced groups (Flores 153). Moraga, like other Chicana feminists, is refuting the notion that there is one correct style or language, and instead, is using many. This creative use of form helps her to retain her unique identity as she speaks to others (Flores 138). It is also necessary for Moraga to utilize various forms of literary groups, including essays, poetry, and plays to reach out and be understood by her audience.

The most glaring obstacle that Moraga faces is her inability to completely affiliate herself with any social or political movement. Due to the inclination to study gender, race and class as individual categories, none of which Moraga can completely identify with, there is the immediate assumption that she also cannot completely be representative of such movements. For example, because Moraga is a lesbian, she is not the “typical” Chicana or the “typical” Anglo feminist and therefore her rhetoric is not as credible. Moraga must make an effort to readjust the disproportionate recognition of these categories because the “norm” is more constrictive than it ought to be. She successfully overcomes this obstacle by developing a persona within the context of her work that is essential to all of the movements and, despite not “fitting” within any particular movement, creates a place for herself through individuality.

In the majority of Moraga’s work, her rhetorical choices reinforce, confirm and balance one another. The development of Moraga’s persona supports her purpose and grants evidence to her essays and poems. In turn, her purpose and evidence reinforce her persona. This triangular support system of rhetorical strategies is an effective choice for Moraga to reach her target audience.

Typical to Chicana rhetoric, Moraga primarily establishes this persona through personal examples. These personal revelations contribute to her credibility as they help her overcome audience and subject related obstacles. For example, Moraga has the physical features of her Chicano mother, but the fair-skin of her Anglo father, so she could easily blend into the white world. When she was young, she quickly acclimated to the philosophy that being light skinned was better than being “colored”. People often told her that she could choose between being white or Chicana. So, although she is half Chicana, Moraga’s audience may believe that her light skin discredits her ethnic authenticity, observations, and personal experiences with oppression because she can be mistaken for white and has the “opportunity” to immerse herself with white society. Moraga combats this obstacle by acknowledging her ability to easily mesh with the Anglo world. The title of the essay, *La Guera*, translates as “fair-skinned”. She also goes to great lengths in the discussion of her sexual orientation to reveal that she does understand, relate and experience oppression. As she says in her essay, *La Guera*, “My lesbianism is the avenue through which I have learned the most about silence and oppression, and it continues to be the most tactile reminder to me that we are to free human beings” (52). After this realization, Moraga made an effort to return to her Chicana heritage and recognize her culture as something separate from the white world.

When I finally lifted the lid to my lesbianism, a profound connection with my mother reawakened in me. It wasn’t until I acknowledged and confronted my own lesbians in the flesh, that my heartfelt identification with and empathy for my mother’s oppression - due to being poor, uneducated, and Chicana - was realized. My lesbianism is the avenue through which I have learned the most about silence and oppression, and it continues to be the most tactile reminder to me that we are not free human beings . . . what I am saying is that the joys of looking like a white girl ain’t so great since I realized I could be beaten

on the street for being a dyke. If my sister's being beaten because she's Black, it's pretty much the same principle . . . The danger lies in ranking oppression.

Although Moraga acknowledges that there are other women of color who experience racism on a more intense level than herself, the revelation of homosexuality builds Moraga's credibility by revealing that she does have a valid perspective of a victimizing position. This allows other oppressed people to relate to her.

Similarly, in her poem, *Winter of Oppression 1982*, Moraga forges common ground between the oppression she has faced in her lifetime with oppression that other groups have faced. For example, she refers to Jews, Black, Puerto Rican, and any other "Ethnic people with long last names with vowels at the end or the wrong type of consonants combined. A colored kind of white people" (74). Ironically, this "equality of oppression" is the evidence that Moraga uses to communicate that oppressed people can relate to one another, despite not living within similar circumstances. Referring to oppression that is felt collectively opens Moraga's rhetoric to an even larger audience while building her credibility as a rhetor who can successfully represent oppression.

Moraga's persona supports her purpose just as her purpose depends on the development of her persona. This idea that people internalize the values of the oppressor appears in both *La Guera* and *Winter of Oppression, 1982*. She wants women to think more deeply about the nature of oppression and their participation in it. She argues that the struggle with oppression must be internally analyzed thoroughly and deeply before change can and will occur.

Typical to feminist rhetoric, the purpose of encouraging women to think about their participation in oppression is to encourage women and other oppressed groups to realize how

they have failed themselves and one another. As she says in *Winter of Oppression*, 1982, "I must believe I am not and will never be the only one who suffers" (Moraga 76). To restate Sara Marabaum's review of Moraga in *Ms Magazine*, "She raises the most painful of feminine questions. What are the forces that divide women from one another? How have white women betrayed their sisters of color? How have women of color betrayed each other?" (Marabaum 27). Moraga argues that the oppressed are always forgetting how they were being hurt. Moraga then illustrates this by relating her experience with the women's movement and their discomfort with different sexual orientations and cultural backgrounds. These differences created separation among the women instead of allowing the opportunity for the dialogue among women to go deeper. Moraga stresses that women, and other oppressed groups, must confront the oppressor and the oppression within themselves. Again, Moraga uses herself as an example of this internal oppression.

I think of how, even as a feminist lesbian, I have so wanted to ignore my own homophobia, my own hatred of myself for being queer. I have not wanted to admit that my deepest personal sense of myself has not quite "caught up" with my "women identified" politics. I have been afraid to criticize lesbian writers who choose to "skip over" these issues in the name of feminism. In 1979, we talk of 'old gay' and 'butch and femme' roles as if they were ancient history. We toss them aside as merely patriarchal notions. And yet, the truth of the matter is that I have sometimes taken society's fear and hatred of lesbians to bed with me. I have sometimes hated my lover for loving me. I have sometimes felt 'not woman enough' for her. I have sometimes felt 'not man enough'. For a lesbian trying to survive in a heterosexist society, there is no easy way around these emotions. Similarly, in a white-dominated world, there is little getting around racism and our own internalization of it.

Moraga strives to empower feminists to confront their own fear and resistance to each other. She

warns that if this collective power does not occur, the feminist movement will not be able to survive as women continuously oppress themselves internally and externally. Moraga's purpose is effective because her rhetoric encourages women to realize that they are observing a world that they know and do not know. Evidence of her effectiveness is visible today as exemplified when the President of the National Organization for Women, Patricia Ireland, noted that more Chicana women are joining the feminist movement. Chicana Studies that support scholarly protest and political activism are emerging in schools across the country. (Zavella 25). Women have established Chicana feminist institutional support that are largely informal, such as networks and organizations of Chicana writers and researchers. At the same time, they were confronting homophobia that disregards gay/lesbian credibility within the organization. Furthermore, these organizations are beginning to recognize the unique oppression of the community of the Chicana lesbians and have been willing to expand their analysis to incorporate multiple oppressions. . (Zavella - 28).

Another strategy Moraga used to reinforce and confirm her persona and purpose is the way she uses evidence in her essay. Her constant reference to self, self-quotation, instigation of consciousness-raising and language strategies such as inclusive language and maintenance of persona in third person, allow Moraga to effectively reach her audience.

The constant use of personal stories as examples is a useful strategy because as she develops her persona, she continuously builds her credibility. This credibility remains a primary source of evidence that she is a competent and trustworthy rhetor. An interesting use of evidence that Moraga incorporates is that she quotes herself. Moraga had attended a concert where Ntosake Shange was reading and following this concert wrote a letter to Barbara Smith. This

letter contained her highly emotional reaction to Shange's reading.

I went to a concert where Ntosake Shange was reading. There, everything exploded for me. She was speaking a language that I knew - in the deepest parts of me - existed and that I had ignored in my own feminist studies and even in my writing . . .

The reading was agitating. Made me uncomfortable. Threw me into a week-long terror of how deeply I was affected. I felt that I had to start all over again., That I turned onto the perceptions of white middle-class women to speak of me and all women. I am shocked by my own ignorance.

Moraga probably included this emotional excerpt in letter form because it permits her to be vulnerable; in letter writing vulnerability is acceptable and does not lessen the credibility of the rhetor. Her sentences are short and allude to the panicky impulsive thought process that she was involved in. This is a complimentary contrast to the other formulated, structured and complete sentences that are located throughout the rest of the essay.

This letter form also probably allows her audience to participate in consciousness-raising. Consciousness-raising is a valuable device in protest discourse. The audience is encouraged to discover their own personal experience as others discuss their experiences. It is a valuable asset to help them realize their own oppressors as a result of listening to others.

Another strategy that Moraga incorporates is that her language, although highly personal, remains inclusive. This is an effective strategy because it allows Moraga to continue to invite other women to be a part of the consciousness-raising experience.

We women have a similar nightmare, for each of *us* in some way has been both oppressed and the oppressor. *We* are afraid to look at how *we* have failed each other . *We* are afraid to see how *we* have taken the values of *our* oppression into *our* hearts and turned them against *ourselves* and one another. *We* are afraid to admit how deeply "the man's"

worlds have been ingrained in *us*.

Inclusive language is a valuable tool because it further breaks down the assumption that Moraga's experience is too removed from the "typical" Chicana/feminist/lesbian experience.

Moraga's persona development utilizes another interesting language strategy in her essay, as well. As Moraga discusses the purpose of her argument, she still maintains a personal tone, despite being occasionally in third person. "To whose camp, then, should the lesbian of color retreat? *Her* very presence violates the ranking and abstraction of oppression." This 'personal third person' contributes to Moraga's characteristic irony as it allows her essay to go beyond being solely a personal assessment. This is also an effective strategy because she does not alienate her readers by relating an essay that is entirely personal.

The triangular relationship between Moraga's development of persona, structure and purpose, compliment and support one another and make her essay effective. Her rhetorical strategies constantly reinforce that she is a credible rhetor and allow her to successfully reach her audience to instigate social change.

In defining the differences among women, Moraga seeks connection, as long as the connection remains respectful of difference, and becomes a point of illumination rather than a mush of obstruction in a whitened, ethnocentric, heterosexual landscape. The Anglo norm is only one of many norms. Studying the Chicana culture and its rhetoric illuminates understanding about groups that literally are between worlds and unable to negotiate their mixed identities. "Feminists of color challenge one of the basic assumptions about women's culture - the notion that feminist theory should be grounded in the commonalities of women's experience. Instead [feminists] should recognize the profound differences among women" (Zavella - 32).

Attempting to dissolve boundaries calls for great attention; past divisions are often hard to overcome. Although Moraga is a victim of oppression in a number of different ways, she finds empowerment in the situation and molds her persona to help her audience see oppression. Her persona reveals that her particular experience is essential to understanding oppression and to help her audience realize that all forms of oppression are fundamentally linked to each other. The goal of interaction among human beings, action and ideas must be seen not only as synthesis, but also as the identification of opposites and differences. These opposites and differences may or may not be resolved; they may function collaboratively by virtue of the similarities identified (Butner 77).

(1) Aleida Del Castillo, a Chicana feminist, is trying to restructure the context of Malinche's history. According to her, Malinche held a deep spiritual commitment; she understood Cortez to be Quetzalcoatl returned in a different form to save the peoples of Mexico from total extinction. Quetzalcoatl was a feathered serpent god recorded by the Aztecs to return from the lost to redeem his people on April 21, 1519 (Western calendar). Pale-faced and bearded, Cortez and his men arrived near that date, thereby fitting the description.

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LA GÜERA

It requires something more than personal experience to gain a philosophy or point of view from any specific event. It is the quality of our response to the event and our capacity to enter into the lives of others that help us to make their lives and experiences our own.

—Emma Goldman*

I am the very well-educated daughter of a woman who, by the standards in this country, would be considered largely illiterate. My mother was born in Santa Paula, Southern California, at a time when much of the central valley there was still farm land. Nearly thirty-five years later, in 1948, she was the only daughter of six to marry an anglo, my father.

I remember all of my mother's stories, probably much better than she realizes. She is a fine story-teller, recalling every event of her life with the vividness of the present, noting each detail right down to the cut and color of her dress. I remember stories of her being pulled out of school at the ages of five, seven, nine, and eleven to work in the fields, along with her brothers and sisters; stories of her father drinking away whatever small profit she was able to make for the family; of her going the long way home to avoid meeting him on the street, staggering toward the same destination. I remember stories of my mother lying about her age in order to get a job as a hat-check girl at Agua Caliente Racetrack in Tijuana. At fourteen, she was the main support of the family. I can still see her walking home alone at 3 a.m., only to turn all of her salary and tips over to her mother, who was pregnant again.

The stories continue through the war years and on: walnut-cracking factories, the Voit Rubber factory, and then the

* Alix Kates Shulman, "Was My Life Worth Living?" *Red Emma Speaks*. (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 388.

computer boom. I remember my mother doing piecework for the electronics plant in our neighborhood. In the late evening, she would sit in front of the T.V. set, wrapping copper wires into the backs of circuit boards, talking about "keeping up with the younger girls." By that time she was already in her mid-fifties.

Meanwhile, I was college-prep in school. After classes, I would go with my mother to fill out job applications for her, or write checks for her at the supermarket. We would have the scenario all worked out ahead of time. My mother would sign the check before we'd get to the store. Then, as we'd approach the checkstand, she would say—within earshot of the cashier—"oh honey, you go 'head and make out the check," as if she couldn't be bothered with such an insignificant detail. No one asked any questions.

I was educated, and wore it with a keen sense of pride and satisfaction, my head propped up with the knowledge, from my mother, that my life would be easier than hers. I was educated; but more than this, I was "la güera"—fair-skinned. Born with the features of my Chicana mother, but the skin of my Anglo father, I had it made.

No one ever quite told me this (that light was right), but I knew that being light was something valued in my family (who were all Chicano, with the exception of my father). In fact, everything about my upbringing (at least what occurred on a conscious level) attempted to bleach me of what color I did have. Although my mother was fluent in it, I was never taught much Spanish at home. I picked up what I did learn from school and from over-heard snatches of conversation among my relatives and mother. She often called other lower-income Mexicans "braceros," or "wet-backs," referring to herself and family as "a different class of people." And yet, the real story was that my family, too, had been poor (some still are) and farmworkers. My mother can remember this in her blood as if it were yesterday. But this is something she would like to forget (and rightfully), for to her, on a basic economic level, being Chicana meant being "less." It was through my mother's desire to protect her children from poverty and illiteracy that we became "anglocized"; the more effectively we could pass in the white world, the better guaranteed our future.

From all of this, I experience, daily, a huge disparity between what I was born into and what I was to grow up to become. Because, (as Goldman suggests) these stories my mother told me crept under my "güera" skin. I had no choice but to enter into the life of my mother. *I had no choice*. I took her life into my heart, but managed to keep a lid on it as long as I feigned being the happy, upwardly mobile heterosexual.

When I finally lifted the lid to my lesbianism, a profound connection with my mother reawakened in me. It wasn't until I acknowledged and confronted my own lesbianism in the flesh, that my heartfelt identification with and empathy for my mother's oppression—due to being poor, uneducated, and Chicana—was realized. My lesbianism is the avenue through which I have learned the most about silence and oppression, and it continues to be the most tactile reminder to me that we are not free human beings.

You see, one follows the other. I had known for years that I was a lesbian, had felt it in my bones, had ached with the knowledge, gone crazed with the knowledge, wallowed in the silence of it. Silence *is* like starvation. Don't be fooled. It's nothing short of that, and felt most sharply when one has had a full belly most of her life. When we are not physically starving, we have the luxury to realize psychic and emotional starvation. It is from this starvation that other starvations can be recognized—if one is willing to take the risk of making the connection—if one is willing to be responsible to the result of the connection. For me, the connection is an inevitable one.

What I am saying is that the joys of looking like a white girl ain't so great since I realized I could be beaten on the street for being a dyke. If my sister's being beaten because she's Black, it's pretty much the same principle. We're both getting beaten any way you look at it. The connection is blatant; and in the case of my own family, the difference in the privileges attached to looking white instead of brown are merely a generation apart.

In this country, lesbianism is a poverty—as is being brown, as is being a woman, as is being just plain poor. The danger lies in ranking the oppressions. *The danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of the oppression*. The danger lies in attempting to deal with oppression purely from a theoretical base. Without an

emotional, heartfelt grappling with the source of our own oppression, without naming the enemy within ourselves and outside of us, no authentic, non-hierarchical connection among oppressed groups can take place.

When the going gets rough, will we abandon our so-called comrades in a flurry of racist/heterosexist/what-have-you panic? To whose camp, then, should the lesbian of color retreat? Her very presence violates the ranking and abstraction of oppression. Do we merely live hand to mouth? Do we merely struggle with the "ism" that's sitting on top of our heads?

The answer is: yes, I think first we do; and we must do so thoroughly and deeply. But to fail to move out from there will only isolate us in our own oppression—will only insulate, rather than radicalize us.

To illustrate: a gay white male friend of mine once confided to me that he continued to feel that, on some level, I didn't trust him because he was male; that he felt, really, if it ever came down to a "battle of the sexes," I might kill him. I admitted that I might very well. He wanted to understand the source of my distrust. I responded, "You're not a woman. Be a woman for a day. Imagine being a woman." He confessed that the thought terrified him because, to him, being a woman meant being raped by men. He *had* felt raped by men; he wanted to forget what that meant. What grew from that discussion was the realization that in order for him to create an authentic alliance with me, he must deal with the primary source of his own sense of oppression. He must, first, emotionally come to terms with what it feels like to be a victim. If he—or anyone—were to truly do this, it would be impossible to discount the oppression of others, except by again forgetting how we have been hurt.

And yet, oppressed groups are forgetting all the time. There are instances of this in the rising Black middle class, and certainly an obvious trend of such "capitalist-unconsciousness" among white gay men. Because to remember may mean giving up whatever privileges we have managed to squeeze out of this society by virtue of our gender, race, class, or sexuality.

Within the women's movement, the connections among women of different backgrounds and sexual orientations have been fragile, at best. I think this phenomenon is indicative of our

failure to seriously address ourselves to some very frightening questions: How have I internalized my own oppression? How have I oppressed? Instead, we have let rhetoric do the job of poetry. Even the word "oppression" has lost its power. We need a new language, better words that can more closely describe women's fear of and resistance to one another; words that will not always come out sounding like dogma.

What prompted me in the first place to work on an anthology by radical women of color* was a deep sense that I had a valuable insight to contribute, by virtue of my birthright and my background. And yet, I don't really understand first-hand what it feels like being shitted on for being brown. I understand much more about the joys of it—being Chicana and having family are synonymous for me. What I know about loving, singing, crying, telling stories, speaking with my heart and hands, even having a sense of my own soul comes from the love of my mother, aunts, cousins...

But at the age of twenty-seven, it is frightening to acknowledge that I have internalized a racism and classism, where the object of oppression is not only someone *outside* my skin, but the someone *inside* my skin. In fact, to a large degree, the real battle with such oppression, for all of us, begins under the skin. I have had to confront the fact that much of what I value about being Chicana, about my family, has been subverted by anglo culture and my own cooperation with it. This realization did not occur to me overnight. For example, it wasn't until long after my graduation from the private college I'd attended in Los Angeles, that I realized the major reason for my total alienation from and fear of my classmates was rooted in class and culture.

Three years after graduation, in an apple-orchard in Sonoma, a friend of mine (who comes from an Italian Irish working-class family) says to me, "Cherrie, no wonder you felt like such a nut in school. Most of the people there were white and rich." It was true. All along I had felt the difference, but not until I had put the words "class" and "race" to the experience, did my

* "La Güera" was originally written for and appeared in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, an anthology co-edited with Gloria Anzaldua. (Boston: Persephone Press, 1981).

feelings make any sense. For years, I had berated myself for not being as "free" as my classmates. I completely bought that they simply had more guts than I did—to rebel against their parents and run around the country hitch-hiking, reading books and studying "art." They had enough privilege to be atheists, for chrissake. There was no one around filling in the disparity for me between their parents, who were Hollywood filmmakers, and my parents, who wouldn't know the name of a filmmaker if their lives depended on it (and precisely because their lives didn't depend on it, they couldn't be bothered). But I knew nothing about "privilege" then. White was right. Period. I could pass. If I got educated enough, there would never be no telling.

Three years after that, I had a similar revelation. In a letter to a friend, I wrote:

I went to a concert where Ntosake Shange was reading. There, everything exploded for me. She was speaking in a language that I knew—in the deepest parts of me—existed, and that I ignored in my own feminist studies and even in my own writing. What Ntosake caught in me is the realization that in my development as a poet, I have, in many ways, denied the voice of my own brown mother—the brown in me. I have acclimated to the sound of a white language which, as my father represents it, does not speak to the emotions in my poems—emotions which stem from the love of my mother.

The reading was agitating. Made me uncomfortable. Threw me into a week-long terror of how deeply I was affected. I felt that I had to start all over again. That I turned only to the perceptions of white middle-class women to speak for me and all women. I am shocked by my own ignorance.

Sitting in that auditorium chair was the first time I had realized to the core of me that for years I had disowned the language I knew best—ignored the words and rhythms that were the closest to me. The sounds of my mother and aunts gossiping—half in English, half in Spanish—while drinking cerveza in the kitchen. And the hands—I had cut off the hands in

my poems. But not in conversation; still the hands could not be kept down. Still they insisted on moving.

The reading had forced me to remember that I knew things from my roots. But to remember puts me up against what I don't know. Shange's reading agitated me because she spoke with power about a world that is both alien and common to me: "the capacity to enter into the lives of others." But you can't just take the goods and run. I knew that then, sitting in the Oakland auditorium (as I know in my poetry), that the only thing worth writing about is what seems to be unknown and, therefore, fearful.

The "unknown" is often depicted in racist literature as the "darkness" within a person. Similarly, sexist writers will refer to fear in the form of the vagina, calling it "the orifice of death." In contrast, it is a pleasure to read works such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, where fear and alienation are depicted as "the white ghosts." And yet, the bulk of literature in this country reinforces the myth that what is dark and female is evil. Consequently, each of us—whether dark, female, or both—has in some way *internalized* this oppressive imagery. What the oppressor often succeeds in doing is simply *externalizing* his fears, projecting them into the bodies of women, Asians, gays, disabled folks, whoever seems most "other."

call me
roach and presumptuous
nightmare on your white pillow
your itch to destroy
the indestructible
part of yourself

—Audre Lorde*

But it is not really difference the oppressor fears so much as similarity. He fears he will discover in himself the same aches, the same longings as those of the people he has shitted on. He fears the immobilization threatened by his own incipient guilt.

* From "The Brown Menace or Poem to the Survival of Roaches," *The New York Head Shop and Museum* (Detroit: Broadside, 1974), p. 48.

He fears he will have to change his life once he has seen himself in the bodies of the people he has called different. He fears the hatred, anger, and vengeance of those he has hurt.

This is the oppressor's nightmare, but it is not exclusive to him. We women have a similar nightmare, for each of us in some way has been both oppressed and the oppressor. We are afraid to look at how we have failed each other. We are afraid to see how we have taken the values of our oppressor into our hearts and turned them against ourselves and one another. We are afraid to admit how deeply "the man's" words have been ingrained in us.

To assess the damage is a dangerous act. I think of how, even as a feminist lesbian, I have so wanted to ignore my own homophobia, my own hatred of myself for being queer. I have not wanted to admit that my deepest personal sense of myself has not quite "caught up" with my "woman-identified" politics. I have been afraid to criticize lesbian writers who choose to "skip over" these issues in the name of feminism. In 1979, we talk of "old gay" and "butch and femme" roles as if they were ancient history. We toss them aside as merely patriarchal notions. And yet, the truth of the matter is that I have sometimes taken society's fear and hatred of lesbians to bed with me. I have sometimes hated my lover for loving me. I have sometimes felt "not women enough" for her. I have sometimes felt "not man enough." For a lesbian trying to survive in a heterosexist society, there is no easy way around these emotions. Similarly, in a white-dominated world, there is little getting around racism and our own internalization of it. It's always there, embodied in someone we least expect to rub up against.

When we do rub up against this person, *there* then is the challenge. *There* then is the opportunity to look at the nightmare within us. But we usually shrink from such a challenge.

Time and time again, I have observed that the usual response among white women's groups when the "racism issue" comes up is to deny the difference. I have heard comments like, "Well, we're open to *all* women; why don't they (women of color) come? You can only do so much..." But there is seldom any analysis of how the very nature and structure of the group itself may be founded on racist or classist assumptions. More importantly, so often the women seem to feel no loss, no lack, no

absence when women of color are not involved; therefore, there is little desire to change the situation. This has hurt me deeply. I have come to believe that the only reason women of a privileged class will dare to look at *how* it is that *they* oppress, is when they've come to know the meaning of their own oppression. And understand that the oppression of others hurts them personally.

The other side of the story is that women of color and white working-class women often shrink from challenging white middle-class women. It is much easier to rank oppressions and set up a hierarchy, rather than take responsibility for changing our own lives. We have failed to demand that white women, particularly those that claim to be speaking for all women, be accountable for their racism.

The dialogue has simply not gone deep enough.

In conclusion, I have had to look critically at my claim to color, at a time when, among white feminist ranks, it is a "politically correct" (and sometimes peripherally advantageous) assertion to make. I must acknowledge the fact that, physically, I have had a *choice* about making that claim, in contrast to women who have not had such a choice, and have been abused for their color. I must reckon with the fact that for most of my life, by virtue of the very fact that I am white-looking, I identified with and aspired toward white values, and that I rode the wave of that Southern California privilege as far as conscience would let me.

Well, now I feel both bleached and beached. I feel angry about this—the years when I refused to recognize privilege, both when it worked against me, and when I worked it, ignorantly, at the expense of others. These are not settled issues. This is why this work feels so risky to me. It continues to be discovery. It has brought me into contact with women who invariably know a hell of a lot more than I do about racism, as experienced in the flesh, as revealed in the flesh of their writing.

I think: what is my responsibility to my roots: both white and brown, Spanish-speaking and English? I am a woman with a foot in both worlds. I refuse the split. I feel the necessity for dialogue. Sometimes I feel it urgently.

But one voice is not enough, nor two, although this is where dialogue begins. It is essential that feminists confront their fear of and resistance to each other, because without this, there *will*

be no bread on the table. Simply, we will not survive. If we could make this connection in our heart of hearts, that if we are serious about a revolution—better—if we seriously believe there should be joy in our lives (real joy, not just “good times”), then we need one another. We women need each other. Because my/your solitary, self-asserting “go-for-the-throat-of-fear” power is not enough. The real power, as you and I well know, is collective. I can’t afford to be afraid of you, nor you of me. If it takes head-on collisions, let’s do it. This polite timidity is killing us.

As Lorde suggests in the passage I cited earlier, it is looking to the nightmare that the dream is found. There, the survivor emerges to insist on a future, a vision, yes, born out of what is dark and female. The feminist movement must be a movement of such survivors, a movement with a future.

September 1979

WINTER OF OPPRESSION, 1982

The cold in my chest comes
from having to decide

while the ice builds up on *this* side
of my new-york-apt.-bldg.-living window,
whose death
has been marked
upon the collective forehead
of this continent, this
shattering globe
the most indelibly.

Indelible. A catholic word
I learned
when I learned
that there were catholics and there
were not.

But somehow
we did not count the Jews
among the have-nots, only protestants
with their cold & bloodless god
with no candles/no incense/no bloody
sacrifice or spirits
lurking.

Protestantism. The white people's
religion.

...

First time I remember
seeing pictures of the Holocaust
was in the tenth grade and the moving pictures
were already there in my mind
somehow *before* they showed me
what I already understood
that these people were killed

for the spirit-blood
that runs through them.

They were like us in this.
Ethnic people with long last names
with vowels at the end or the wrong
type of consonants
combined a colored kind of white people.

But let me tell you
first time I saw an actual
picture glossy photo of a lynching
I was already grown & active
& living & loving Jewish.
Black. White. Puerto
Rican.

And the image blasted
my consciousness
split it wide I
had never thought seen
heard of such a thing
never even imagined the look
of the man the weight
dead hanging swinging heavy
the fact of the white people
cold bloodless
looking on It

had never occurred to me
I tell you I
the nuns failed to mention
this could happen, too
how *could* such a thing happen?

because somehow dark real dark
was not quite real
people killed
but some
thing not
taken to heart
in the same way it feels

to see white shaved/starved
burned/buried
the boned bodies stacked & bulldozed
into huge craters made by men
and machines
and at fifteen I counted 22
bodies only in the far left-hand
corner of the movie screen
& I kept running
through my mind
*and I'm only one
count one
it could be me
it could be me
I'm nothing
to this cruelty.*

...

Somehow tonight,
is it the particular coldness
where my lover sleeps with a scarf
to keep it out
that causes me to toss
and turn the events of the last weeks
the last years of my life
around in my sleep?

Is it the same white coldness
that forces my back up
against the wall—*choose.*
choose.

I cannot
choose nor forget

how simple
to fall back
upon rehearsed racial memory.

I work to remember
what I never dreamed possible

what my consciousness could never
contrive.

Whoever I am

I must believe
I am not
and will never be
the only
one
who suffers.